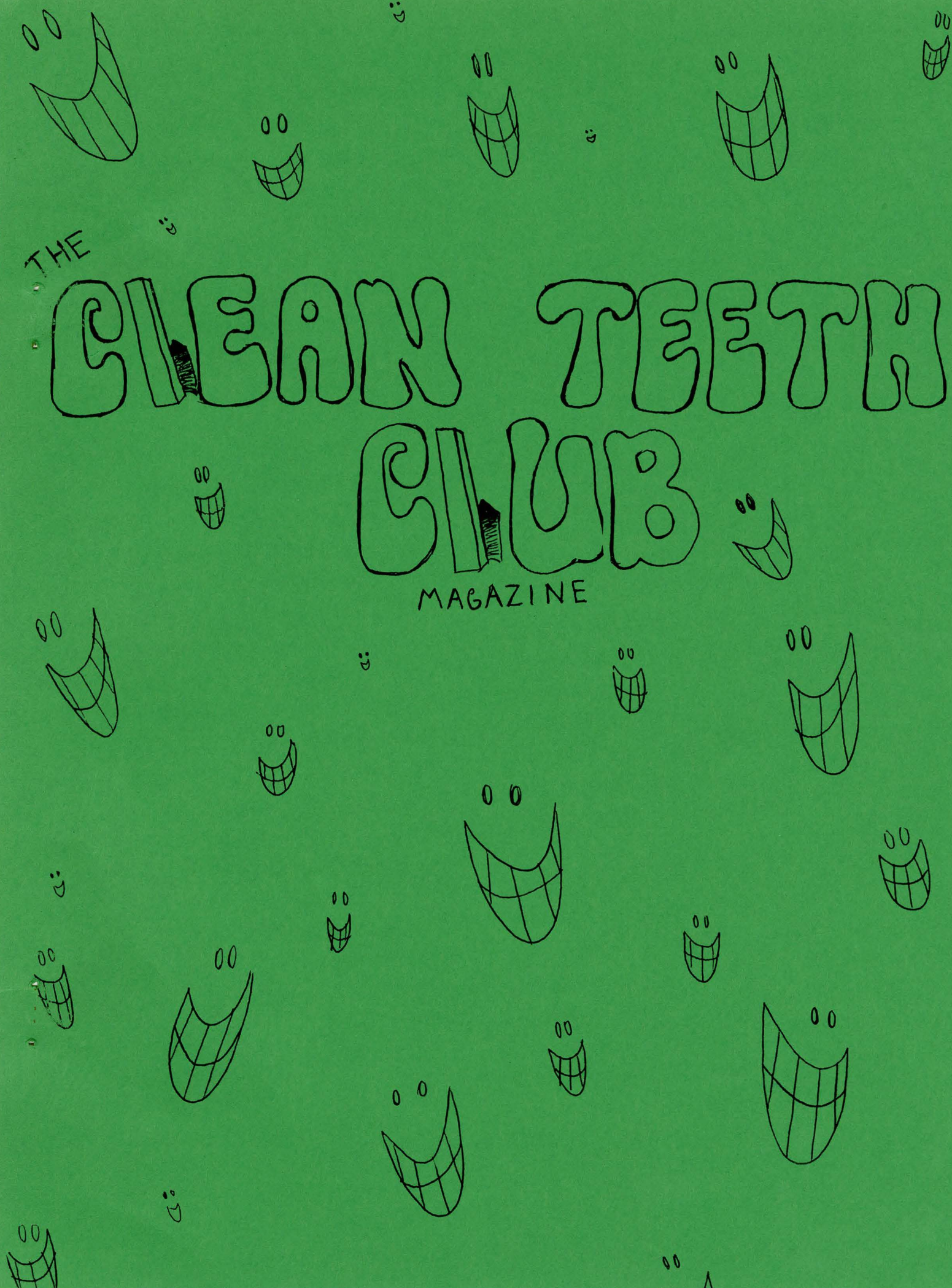


THE

CLEAN TEETH CLUB

MAGAZINE





The Importance of Good Oral Hygiene

*This magazine was the brainchild of the CTC's
founder and organizer, Conan J. Bailey,
and it is through his Memorial Fund that this was printed,
and it is in his honor and to his memory that I dedicate these pages.*

"I found this section to be juvenile and trite."

I gasped as the words came out of the person next to me. Then I laughed at the silence that followed the critique of my short story. Brutally honest, we'd all agreed in advance. And brutally honest we were. Okay, so sometimes we erupted into violent altercations (both verbal and nonverbal) and we always left exhausted. But we always succeeded in doing what we set out to do — sharing, encouraging, critiquing and improving our writing and the writing of the others. (And it didn't hurt that we all had sparkling teeth.) The Clean Teeth Club was formed in January and we faithfully attended meetings in the Lit. House "war" room every other Friday night, usually for three hours (and sometimes more). The Writer's Union gave us the funds for Xeroxing and we became our own extra-curricular, mini creative writing class. Sometimes there was so much intensity in the room that dental tools were chucked with every intention of eliciting blood. But they never did. Usually we spent as much time laughing as anything.

I wrote the above paragraph to give the reader some idea of why this magazine is being published and how it came into being.

This would never have been possible without: Prof. Robert Day (Praise be!), Dean Maureen MacIntyre (Bless you), Tanya Angell Allen (you goddess you), all the great and glorious people who gave money to the Memorial Fund (including my parents), Jodie and Sam and Katie (who have very clean teeth) and Ryan (who finally got his dentist's note), Susie at MSM, John P. O'Hearn, Jr. (because he's never stepped a foot into the Lit House and never will), and anyone who takes the time to read this magazine.

Erin Kathleen Rowe, *Editor*

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Conan J. Bailey

Papa on the Lawn

The front door snicked open. Leera cautiously peeked her head around the corner. Papa was still sitting on the lawn. He had been there for quite a while. Ever since sundown.

Papa sat on the lawn often. He said that he enjoyed the comfort of the quietness. He said that people who have advantages that Leera and her two brothers did should try to use them as much as they could. If they didn't, he said, one day they might wake up to find those advantages had fluttered away.

When Papa talked of the advantages, Leera knew vaguely what he meant. He meant that not many people have front lawns anymore. Not many people have their won houses anymore. Not many people had the money for anything anymore. Not many people had the time to sit on their lawn and ponder the stars like Papa did so often.

Leera knew that Papa was thinking about the stars. He thought about the stars and the moon and many things in the sky very often. She asked him why once.

"Have you ever looked at the stars, Leera?"

"Yes, Papa."

"What do you see?"

Leera didn't answer for a long while. She thought her answer before speaking. Papa knew this was her method and did not rush her.

"I see lots of worlds. I see many new things. I see beauty and adventure. I see places that are clean and fresh. I even can sometimes see the monster and the machines and the creations of the writers."

Papa looked sad. He said, "What writers, Leera?"

"The writers from school. The ones that tell us all about the many planets there are to explore when we get older, if our marks in school are good enough. They tell us about the rocketships and about the pioneers like Mama who were the first to travel to the new places."

Papa, with sad eyes, said no more. Leera left him alone to watch the stars. They were many different colors. Most people only saw the white stars, but Papa could see the blue ones, the green ones, and even the yellow ones. Papa had very peculiar and spectacular eyesight. Many scientists often asked Papa for his assistance when working in the laboratories. Papa was paid for his eyesight.



And Papa's eyesight was what first interested Mama in the stars.

She always was amazed that Papa could see so many different things in the sky. Mama was a curious woman anyway. It shouldn't have surprised Papa when Mama told him that she wanted to see the colors of the stars for herself.

"And how will you do that, my beautiful wife? You cannot use my eyes."

She hesitated. With a timid voice came, "I must then get closer to them, mustn't I?"

Papa did not reply. He just looked surprised and sad. He went to bed.



And Denno, Leera's younger brother, once came onto the lawn to join Papa.

"Hello, Papa."

"Hello, Denno. What brings you to the lawn this late at night when you should be sleeping?"

"I have decided an important thing today, Papa. I have decided it because of the writers at school and because I have talked to Leera."

"Are these writers the same ones that Leera tells me about? The ones that talk all the time about the beauty of Space?"

"Yes, Papa."

Papa, a wise man, knew what was in his son's head. But Papa was also a fair and rational man.

"What have you decided, Denno." It was a statement, not a question.

Denno waited a few moments as they both watched a new rocket explode into the air from another place. Papa respected the pause.

"I want to be a Rocketman, Papa."

Papa's eyes, never very bright any longer, saddened a bit more in the starlight.

"Okay, Denno. But you have some years left. Keep you marks up."

And Papa said no more.



Another night, another year. And now Leera comes onto the lawn as she has many times before. She approaches Papa.

"Papa, it is late. Come inside now."

"I am not tired, Leera. And do not tell your Papa what to do. Besides, I must say goodnight to Mama."

Leera looks starward. "Do you know which star she is tonight, Papa?"

"No."

Deel, Leera's older brother, a writer, joins Papa and Leera on the lawn.

"Denno goes away tomorrow, Papa. We should be proud that he is now a Rocketman. Only the elite, you know."

"I know, Deel. I know better than you do."

Silence. The stars shimmer, moving ever so slightly. Papa catches all the movements in his eyes.

"Do you hate me for sending them away, Papa?"

"You have not sent them away, Deel. They go because they want to do."

"But I wrote about the places to the children in school and to the people of the world. I made them fall in love with Space."

"Deel, you showed them something that they would have found anyway. I do not hate you. Now leave me with my stars."

Deel retreats to the house. Leera remains.

"You leave also, Leera."

She ignores his request. "You should forgive him, Papa."

"There is nothing to forgive."

Silence as another rocket scorches the sky.

"That could be Denno's rocket," said Papa.

"He is not leaving until tomorrow."

"It is tomorrow where the rockets go up."

"Denno says that he will send money like Mama does so that we will always have our advantages," said Leera.

"In Space I don't think that anyone calls her 'Mama,' do they?"

"No, Papa."

"I will be dead by the time she returns. If she does. And she will have only aged a few years or weeks or maybe just days. Relativity, isn't that what they call it?"

"Yes, Papa."

"I call it unfair. Leave me to say goodnight to the stars, Leera."

Leera leaves Papa. he says goodnight to the stars. He says goodnight to Mama and Denno. And Papa stays on the lawn for a long, long time.

Gravel

There were twenty eight people on the gravel lane when the sun fell down. Twenty of them were men, six of them were women, and two of them were children. The children were both girls with hair in ponytails.

Of the men, nineteen were wearing jeans or some kind of jeanish material. The twentieth was wearing black slacks. In fact, he was wearing a full suit. His tie was dark grey with black stripes, and the jacket was black. His shoes, though a little scuffed, were fairly impressive. Black, perhaps leather, definitely expensive, and obviously made to go with the suit.

Of the men, eighteen were carrying rifles (eighteen bolt actions, of which there were fifteen Browning, two Remingtons, and one Springfield). The man in the suit was not. He was carrying a handgun (a 32 ounce Browning high-power automatic with a thirteen shot magazine capacity, but one bullet was missing). But no one knew it; it was in an inconspicuous shoulder holster underneath the suit jacket.

Of the men, eighteen of them were standing, breathing, and speaking in husky but subdued voices. Two of them were not. The man in the suit was one of those men standing and breathing, but he was not talking. One of the men in jeans was not standing, breathing, or talking; nor was he carrying a rifle.

Of the women, five of them were in a group, talking — almost arguing — in soft voices. The sixth was not. She was with the children.

Of the women, five of them wore long dresses. The dresses were not fancy or expensive things, but they definitely accentuated the femininity of those who wore them. The sixth did not. She wore jeans.

Of the women, five of them were wives. In fact, those five who were wives were wed to five of the men in jeans. And those five women were part of a larger group of wives. All of whom wore dresses. The sixth woman was not a wife.

Of the children, one was deaf. No one knew this yet, though, as the girl had only lost her hearing in the last quarter hour. The two girls were sisters. And both were the daughters of the unwed woman who wore jeans. And of the silent man who secretly carried a handgun.



"Why won't she speak?"

"They say she's lost her hearing."

"Who's they?"

"The doc, I s'pose."

"Well, just 'cause she cain't hear don't mean she cain't speak."

"I'd say it's obvious enough that if she was a-close enough to burst an eardrum, then she was a-close enough to see who drew the bead on Buffet."

"Even if she saw, that don't mean beans. She don't know the folks in this town, much less half the county who could have easy enough come through an' left again 'fore we ever got here."

"An' just how many folks you think are gonna do their travelin' on a Sundee?"

"If I was aimin' to bead a man, it wouldn't matter which day it was on. Obvious enough I wouldn't be churchly-like in the first place."

"No, I'm thinkin' he's right. No rightly man, churchly or not, would seek to do his killin' in another town on a Sundee."

Pause.

"So we's a-workin' with somebody in this here town?"

"Seems that way."

Pause. Pause.

"I knows a few fellows who're thinkin' that Mr. Louvain is the newest farmer 'round here."

"He ain't no farmer! He's a word pecker! Him in his city-suits an' books an' all!"

"Ho, boys! I happen to know right well that Mr. Louvain is a good feller whose pap was a farmer. Mr. Louvain has done come back to where his blood wants ta be. An' if he wants ta peck away at a typin' machine, well, that ain't no cause or business of yours. An' you 'member, too, that Mr. Louvain ain't the newest in town, neither. The newest was Buffet."

"Least Buffet was a farm man."



"I brought this over, dear, so you wouldn't have to worry about the cookin' t'night. I 'spect you've got enough things troublin' your mind now, with your little girl all frightened an' everythin'."

"Why, that's very kind of you, Miss —"

"Just call me Matty, hon. All the girls do. We're just simple an' informal 'round these parts. I don't 'spect you know much about livin' out here?"

"Actually, Matty, I grew up on a farm and can handle myself quite well. It's a joy to be back on a farm after so many years of living with highways and malls and things."

"Oh, I know, dear. I don't know how you all — well, not so much you any more — I don't know how people can stand to be that...that...citified, I s'pose."

"Some things aren't so bad. I could have taken Kerenza to a hospital."

"Well, now, the doc ain't so bad neither. He used to work at a hospital once, y'know. I'm sure he's done all any city doctor can. How's she doin'? Is she speakin' at all?"

"No. She's started writing things down to communicate, though. I'm sure it's not that she can't speak, but that she's so disoriented from not being able to hear herself or anyone else that she doesn't want to try to speak."

"Oh, yes. I see how that would make a child feel. Mm-hm. Say, has she wrote anything about what she saw? I mean, about Mr. Buffet?"

Pause.

"No. And I don't suppose I'm going to push her about it either. It's a little late to do anything about it now, isn't it? Mr. Buffet probably doesn't care one way or another."

"Dear, maybe you been away too long. That just ain't how it works 'round here. The men, they're out for seein' justice done."



"Mr. Louvain, could I talk ta ya fer a minute?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"Well, this here is kind of awk-a-ward fer me to be talkin' ta ya about, but I's been elected by the men —"

"You mean the real men, don't you? The farmer men, a group I apparently am not a part of, correct?"

"Well, yessir, if you wanna put it that way. Look, I ain't here ta make no trouble, I just gotta ask ya so we all can say that this here thing has been done in the right legal way."

"I didn't shoot him. Why would I want to? And you know as well as any man — any farmer — in this town that I don't own a rifle. Any man, any farmer, or any law that wants to take that up with me can. But I'm not going to stand in the middle of this street and argue with each and every man that takes it upon himself to distribute justice."

Pause. Pause.

"But ole doc an' ole man Codges say that he warn't shot with a rifle, Mr. Louvain. They say it was a gun. A real gun-like thing. An' doc ought ta know, too, an' ole man Codges, he's old enough ta have been in ev'ry war this country's been in. He ought ta know, too."



"Are the girls in bed?"

"Yes. Finally. Kerenza couldn't sleep for obvious reasons. Lizzanne couldn't sleep because Kerenza couldn't sleep. Those two should have been Siamese twins."

Pause. Pause. Pause.

"All the gents of the town are suspicious. They either avoid me entirely or ask me directly."

"What do you tell them?"

"What do you think? I'm not going to say, 'Hey, boys, Buffet was a Tool from New York and you didn't even know it. I did the decent world a favor.' Or maybe I could fake them out and say, 'The damn fool Buffet *knew* that I used that street for target practice.'"

"Hey. Relax. No use in fuming about it. Besides, I don't think that they'll be too interested once their garms need tending. By the way, one of the women brought some good over for dinner. One of those country kinds of things that my mother used to do whenever the neighbors were sick."

"Great. The ladies of the town are fixing you dinner and the men are fixing me a lynching."

Pause.

"Does this mean we have to leave?"

"No. We lived in Connecticut for three years. They knew I was there. We didn't move here to run away from them. We moved here to get out of the city shit, remember?"

"Yes."

Pause.

"What happens if they send another? What happens if they send more than one?"

"I've handled it before. I imagine I can do the same. By the time they send another I hope to be a bit more friendly with the doc and the judge. then I can tell them, give them some idea of all this crap. These truly are good men in this town, Kyrstin. If one of their kind — I mean someone that they accept — needed their help, they would give it full force."



There were four people on the gravel lane when the sun climbed back up. All four of them were men.

Of these men, two were wearing jeans and carrying rifles. The rifles were both bolt action Brownings. Both these men were tall and thin, somewhat lanky, but obviously strong and in good health.

The other two men were wearing dark grey suits that matched their solemn faces. The hair was noticeably meticulous but at the same time unremarkable. Underneath the suitcoats, both men wore shoulder holsters. Both shoulder holsters carried .38 Llama Model VIII automatic pistols with nine-shot magazines. No bullets were missing yet. One of the men also carried a knife strapped to his lower back and a coiled garrote in his inside pocket. All of these weapons were hidden from the two in jeans.



"Do you understand the urgency of the situation with which my partner and I are presently faced?"

"Look, I doanno about situations and such, but if the man is trash, if he's a rat and criminal like you say he is, an' you got proof that he is, then we doan want him in our town. We doan want him near our town."

"Well, you can see by our credentials that we here at the request of the government to protect you, your town, and your families. And you can see by these court documents that we have due cause. If you like, we can wait until your judge is awake and he can verify that everything is in order, but frankly, friends, we are running out of time here."

"How's that?"

"The longer we wait, the more time Mr. Louvain has to escape. Which means he has another opportunity to do more damage. It's just lucky that Mr. Buffet didn't leave a family behind."



Ring.

"Louvain."

"Howdy, Mr. Louvain. This is Doc Trueman."

"Good morning, doc. What can I do for you?"

"Well, Mr. Louvain, it seems that because of the Buffet incident yesterday there's mighty unrest in the town. The men are all congregatin' this morning to talk it over an' would like it if you were there, seein' that your a man of the town, that is."

"You mean to say that the men of the town are congregating to talk to me about the 'Buffet incident,' don't you?"

"Well, Mr. Louvain, I wouldn't — "

"Where?"

"The courthouse."

"Ten minutes."

Click.



"It's a good thing we told Buffet to call us and let us know when he finished the job so when he didn't we knew he had fucked up."

"Shut up. Here he comes. Are you sure that all the good ol' boys are in the courthouse?"

"Yes, I'm sure. It doesn't matter if they see or not, though. They want him dead as much as we do. Besides, they won't hear with the silencers we've got."

"Quiet. You first. Don't fuck up. If you miss him, I'm going to kill him, then you."

Pause. Pause. Pause. Pause.

Thub.



"You done killed 'im. You done shot 'im."

"I know, Doctor Trueman. I had to. He tried to strangle me with this garrote. It's pretty much all over now, Doctor Trueman, but I need you and the judge to keep all the men in the courthouse. My partner and I need to debrief them. In fact, we want you to call everyone in the town to the courthouse."

"Ev'rone? Even women an' children?"

"Everyone, please, Doctor Trueman. Everyone in this town has had contact with the former Mr. Louvain. It is the policy of the Untied States government to hold debriefing sessions with all the those involved. Your cooperation is appreciated in the matter and makes it easier for us to do our jobs and for your lives to get back to normal."

Pause.

"Awright. Give me a few minutes. We're gonna have ta hold in the church, though as there ain't enough room in the courthouse. I'll go ring the bell."

"The bell?"

"Calls ev'rbody ta church."



"Ev'rbody's in the church."

"Good. Thank you, Doctor Trueman. Could you do me one last favor? Go in an announce to the folks why they've all been called to church. I've got to go collect my partner. We'll be inside in just a few moments."

"Okay."

"Oh, and Doctor Truemen. Thanks once again for your cooperation."



"Kerenza, where's your sister?"

I'm hearing better, ma. my ears don't hurt as much as they did yesterday. I could almost understand what you said.

"That's good. Probably they just need a rest. Where's your sister?"

She went to church.

"Church? Why?"

She said she heard the church bell ringing. She said she was going to see what they were doing.



Boom. Rumble.

"Mama! MAMA!"

"Kerenza! Stop screaming. What is it? Are you ears okay?"

"MAMA!"

"Kerenza, what?!"

"Mama, the church just blew up!"

Pause.

"Ohgodlizanne."



"Job well done, I'd say. It's not every day you get to wipe out a whole town."

"Yeah, but let's not stand here smirking about it. That big ball of flames is going to attract attention from someone. Throw the forgeries into the fire."

"You want to throw Louvain in, too?"

"No. I fixed it so it looks like he shot himself. They'll think he went nuts and blew up the church, then killed himself."

"Heh. It's great to be a Tool with someone who knows his stuff."

"Unlike Buffet."

Pause.

"Make sure you put your government ID in the back of your wallet. We can't use that one for a while again."

Pause.

"What did the *capo* say when you talked to him?"

"One hundred thou each from the *capo* as usual for a hit. Then, since Louvain was bothering some outside interests — friends of the family — *capo* managed to secure an add of seven-fifty thou for each of us."

"Damn. That's eight hundred fifty thou for each of us! That's one-point-seven mil total! Louvain must have been one hell of a mosquito."

Pause.

"Stop drooling. Let's go. New York, home sweet home."



There were two people on the gravel lane when the sun fell down. Two of them were women. Of the women, one was a mother and one was a daughter.

The daughter had a ponytail and sad, stony eyes. The mother, kneeling next to her daughter, had sad eyes also, but they were silently wet. The daughter held her mother's head in her arms.

To Take a Dive

"Ten minutes and we'll be out to sea, away from the rest of the world. Cut off, you see? No phones calls, no visits, no interruptions. Just us. Isn't it nice?"

The lack of his answer was his answer.

"Aren't you listening to me? Of course you are. You're just fatigued. Why don't you lie down here and I'll leave you alone?"

He left the room.

Twenty minutes later she found him on the observation lounge of the sun deck. He knew she was there, but he also knew that she wouldn't approach him as he was conversing with another passenger. A passenger that could be fun to talk with, if only to anger her. The ship's doctor.

Three hours later she found him swimming in the sea water pool one deck lower. He would dive, then swim a few laps, then dive, then swim a few laps.

She didn't see him again until breakfast the next morning.

"Where were you for so long last night?"

"Enjoying myself."

"With?"

"Not you."

"You need to get more sleep."

He didn't answer.

She was eating butter with toast underneath. And coffee with two spoonfulls of sugar and "just enough" cream. He wasn't eating anything.

"Aren't you hungry? You need to eat more."

"Ate at midnight."

"It's seven thirty."

"You tell time too? Jesus, I couldn't ask for more."

She, with a blank face, feigned deafness.

She fiddled with a knife too dull to be fit for its name. She slapped a piece of toast underneath some more butter. He half-eye stared through the nearest handrail, over the ocean.

He left the table.

Two hours later he was diving and swimming again. She was watching, counting his dives and his laps, and calculating the ratio between them.



There was a boy on the pool deck with him tonight. It was surprising to see anyone out here with him, not only because of the lateness (or earliness) of the hour, but also because the cruise was off season. Whatever that meant.

There sat the boy, watching him, but not interacting with him. The boy was young, perhaps twelve or thirteen; he couldn't be much older than that or he would enter the realm of "young manhood." The boy sat to one side of the pool just watching Frewin dive and swim and dive. Frewin didn't mind; rather, he thought it was oddly attractive to have an audience. To have a witness.

Innocent minds rarely perjure themselves.

"What do you see?" asked Frewin as he climbed out of the pool again.

The boy didn't answer. He blinked and combed his dark hair — Frewin couldn't see the color clearly — with a large hand. A large hand. Yes, those hands were disproportionately large on that boy. Almost a disfigurement; one that Frewin hadn't noticed, though, until the boy had used the thing.

"Can you hear me?" Frewin asked, wondering if the boy was impaired, not only with cumbersome hands, but with inadequate hearing.

"Dive," said the boy. It was a command, not a question or a request.

So Frewin dove. And dove. And he kept diving until he was too tired to concentrate. And when, after his final dive, he looked up and over for the boy, he found that the seat was vacant.



"So, how are you this morning?" she asked him.

"Fine," said Frewin.

"You're not fine, either. I saw you diving yesterday. You're getting slower and you dive less and less. You need to rest more, you know. You're here to rest, not to dive all the time. Your body can't take all the diving."

He left the table.



"What do you see?" Frewin asked the boy again that night.

"I heard you talking to the doctor," the boy answered, ignoring the original question.

"I see. So?"

"So, dive."

And Frewin dove. But not for too long. He stopped to talk with the boy again.

"Now, what do you see?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I want to make sure you can see what I already know is there."

Both Frewin and the boy listened to a huge silence stomp into their conversation.

"I want to learn how to dive," said the boy.

"Do you know how to swim?"

"I used to."

The boy stood and walked away. He walked slowly, carefully, as if fearing a stumble.



"I'm sick," said the boy on the next night.

"Well, let me take you to the ship's doctor then."

"I saw you — I heard you — talking to the ship doctor."

"So you told me last night. I have talked to him a few times recently."

"I heard what you talked about. You're sick. You are really sick."

"Am I? Do you really think so? What do you see when you come here at night? A sick man who dives?"

"No. A diver who doesn't want to be sick anymore."

Frewin didn't answer. He dove.



"I haven't seen much of you on this vacation, Frewin. This is supposed to be for your relaxation, remember? Your recovery?"

Quiet air lingered over the breakfast table.

"Take a moment and think about what you've said, mother. My recovery? You know damn well that there is no such thing. Why shouldn't we call this vacation what it is really intended for? My bon voyage party, perhaps?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you — "

"Mother! Stop talking and just think for once. Why am I here on this vacation? To recover? No, you know as well as I or any doctor that this is my last chance at a vacation. So why shouldn't I do

what pleases me the most?"

"But — "

"Leave me in peace, mother."



"Are you sicker than I am?" asked the boy.

"What do you mean?"

"Terminal?"

Frewin, surprised at this, answered, "Less than a month. You?"

"About the same."

Frewin dove for a while.

"Why do you watch me dive?"

"I like to watch you dive because I know you are sick. You are as sick as I am and you cans till dive. You can still dive."

"Do you still want to learn how to dive?"

"I don't...I can't...I'm afraid."

Frewin paused and the boy waited.

"What's there to be afraid of? Death? You've got that coming anyway. Do you want to learn how to dive? To really dive? The right way?"

Frewin climbed from the pool and walked to the handrail of the pool deck.

The boy left.



Frewin comes to the pool deck tonight, but he does not dive.

He walks to the handrail and looks over the ocean. Over the diveable water.

The boy also comes to the pool deck tonight.

The boy says, "Yes. Yes, I want to earn. I want to learn how to dive now, tonight. I want to learn right now. There won't be another night to learn."

Frewin and the boy stand at the handrail.

"The ship is moving fast; there will a swift current," says Frewin.

Frewin and the boy, his witness, dive from the side of the ship.

Jodie Lyle Clark

Scenes From St. Andrew's

Geoff,

Be alive.

It is Wednesday at St. Andrew's Hospital, third floor waiting room.

St. Andrew's. Good hospital to go to after you've had an accident, I suppose. I suppose you did not get to pick. The third floor waiting room has not changed much. I remember the magazine racks and their simulated wood grain — when you reach for a magazine the racks wobble a little, looking dangerously as if they will fall. But no one notices because the magazines on the third floor waiting room of St. Andrew's do not get read.

Here is what the people who are not reading the magazines are doing.

There is a big man in loose-fitting overalls and muddy workboots. He is sleeping, his blue baseball cap covering his face. There is an older woman in a cardigan counting prayers with a rosary. There is an eight- or nine-year-old boy chewing gum, bouncing his feet against the metal legs of his chair. His face is sour; his gum is probably old. There is a woman in her fifties seated, swaying. Her husband is pacing, looking angry, looking lost and angry because of it. There is me. I am sitting across from the couple; I am running my hand through my hair and scribbling on a sheet of legal pad paper. There is a rhythm in this waiting room: breathing, chewing, leg-banging, swaying, pacing, writing. The rhythm is controlled, the silence is controlled. But the sleeping man's lips tremble while he dreams. There is something disturbing about those trembling lips. The gum-chewer notices it; it changes the rhythm of his bouncing legs.

No, I didn't have to be waiting in the third floor waiting room. There is a lobby and a snack bar. There is a restaurant and there are waiting rooms on every other floor.

They have told me almost nothing.

"They" are your parents, who called me tonight and told me not to come to the hospital because they (doctors, nurses?) wouldn't let you be seen. "They," the doctors and nurses, are possessive. So are your parents, possessive with the information that they have. And I am possessive as well, of you and of your accident. When you become conscious, you may have your accident back, but now it is my accident, so I will wait in the third floor waiting room and run my pen across a legal pad, your stupid striped pajamas in a paper bag at my feet. What I am writing you may not read; the striped pajamas you probably won't wear even if you do "wake up," but it's what I have; your mother has what she knows, the doctors have you. There's a woman across from me who has a God who requires incessant mumbling. I have your pajamas.

The moment your mother called from the hospital and told me not to come, I decided that I was going to drive to your apartment, get your striped pajamas, put them in a brown paper bag, get back into my car, and go to the hospital and wait in the waiting room of whatever floor you happened to be on.

I asked your mother what hospital it was, and she said, "St. Andrew's, off of Exit 6," and I said, "Thank you, I know where it is," trying not to sound like it bothered me that you were at St. Andrew's, and decided I'd got there anyway.

And here I am.

Christ. I'm going home. The light bulb in the stairway of my apartment has burned out and I forgot to get the landlord to fix it. It will be dark climbing those stairs.

It's Thursday. Be alive.

I'm still writing to you. I suppose there's not much else that I can be doing. I saw you today, lying there with tubes and casts and your unconsciousness. Possessiveness of your own, I suppose.

This is what I told your parents and the family of the woman with the Volvo and the airbag: "It would make sense that Geoff was on the wrong side of the road because the moon was orange, crescent, and beautiful last night [yes, Geoff, I noticed it as well]. He often leans his head out of his window while driving to look. He looks too long; it is a dangerous practice. Probably the blame rests solely on him."

Your insurance will probably skyrocket.

I, also, am thinking of the night we kept the moon in front so you could see it easily through the window while you drove. All night long, down any street or highway, moon in front, until it was gone and it was day and we drove back to my apartment.

Keeping the moon in front. We are possessive people, Geoff, you and I. Be alive.

To the Board of Directors of St. Andrew's Hospital:

This is my second experience with St. Andrew's and its packrat-like hoarding of information regarding patients whose conditions may or may not be terminal. This time it regards Geoffrey Michaelson, who was in an automobile accident. His family and friends have been able to pry no information from your uncooperative, unresponsive staff about his exact condition. This withholding of information seems to be St. Andrew's policy. Eleven years ago, my grandmother was admitted to your hospital, where she remained for a year and a half before dying. Not once did your doctors confront my family in a manner that was in any way better than elusive.

Fix the policy.

Amanda Jenkins

Geoff,

Had you known that Grandma Beth stayed at St. Andrew's?

With Grandma Beth, when she was here, the doctors stopped coming in to discuss her condition with us; my father would have to go out and actually force it out of them. Even then they'd speak in their cryptic doctor language and appease us while we waited for her to die. Grandma Beth died in this very same hospital on this very same floor; I did not cry. I was fifteen. I cried about everything that year, except for Grandma dying.

This is what happened:

I was fifteen. In March of that year, my grandmother got sick enough to be admitted into this very hospital. Every night at six-thirty, my family — my mother, my father, and Allison (Andrew had moved out by that point) — put the last dinner dish in the dishwasher, piled into my father's stationwagon and drove to St. Andrew's hospital. We'd get there at seven, and be able to spend an hour there until visiting hours were over at eight. Grandma Beth stayed in the hospital until the next July, when she died. By the time January had come, and Grandma was in the hospital for almost eleven months, I started staying home. There were papers I said I had to write, and oral reports I said I had to give. Then I stopped giving excuses and just stopped going.

In April, the doctors changed the medicine and the I.V. The family viewed the change as some sign of hope. End of April, early May, and once again the doctors were perplexed. Now they thought she needed surgery. They moved Grandma to a new room. Afterwards, nothing. Grandma stayed there and got worse. Every week or so something would be changed — the medicine, or the dosage, or the diet, or the room.

All my relatives kept wanting her to be dead. "If only she were out of her misery," they'd say; I'd think of Old Yeller. My mother's refrain became, "God, age is one thing. Growing old. It happens. But this. If there were only some plug somebody could pull." By August everyone was relatively frank about the whole situation, but nobody was really honest. Their euphemisms became unbearable.

My father alone was honest. He'd come home from the hospital and look around nervously for something he thought he'd lost, and say, "I wish she were dead." And say it again. "I wish she were dead." "I wish she were dead."

The statement should have stood alone; my father should have been allowed to pace silently around the kitchen for a few more minutes looking for something he hadn't lost, but he never was allowed. "Well," my mother would say, each time, "Age is one thing. Growing old. . . well, it happens. But this. . ."

I'm not going to look at you like this anymore tonight. The nurse who was just in here grunted at me again. I forgot to call the landlord again, the stairway outside of the apartment building last night was completely black; the crescent moon through the window did not give enough light to see.



Friday.

Last night when I got home, I just sat in my armchair with a cup of hot chocolate and looked out the window and into the window of the third floor of the house across the street. Sometimes I like to watch the woman who lives there dance with her violin. You hate violin music.

The violinist never notices me. Has no need to. She raises her bow to the strings and begins a strange ritual dance every night — rigid face, closed eyes, liquid movement. Strength and discipline, completely controlled, still, her movement — it's like she is underwater.

I used to be, and still am, intrigued of this ritual. But last night I wanted to throw my chair through the window at her and watch the dance get crushed and her violin splintered and broken on the floor.

I hate her for her autonomous life. I hate her that she has so much control. I sit in my apartment and worry, or go to the hospital and write letters to a man who is not there.

You, finally, have gained the face of my grandmother. You look yellow, and wrinkles seem to appear, even where they are not. You do not move. You do not respond to touch. Still, the doctors say you will snap out of it "any day now." They say my presence here is probably helpful.

Like hell it is.

They say I should talk to you, gather together your friends, get them to talk to you, make tapes of familiar voices — maybe you can hear, maybe somehow you will respond — a blink of an eyelash, maybe, and that will be a jumping point.

Like hell you'll respond.

It's not hard for doctors. I watch them come in and check up on your condition, and then rush off to the patients over whom they can exercise their god-like doctor powers and make a difference.

I don't have any other patients and I don't have a violin and all I can do is put words on paper that no one will read.

I told you before that I begged off visiting my grandmother and told my parents I had papers and homework to do. Most of the time I did, but I didn't do them on the nights they were gone.

I'd watch as the headlights of my father's car disappeared with the sound of rain on gravel. I'd breathe, slowly put on my shoes, pull on my coat, and reach my hand into the kitchen cabinet in which was kept the set of spare keys. I'd shake them, locate the one belonging to my mother's Buick, walk outside, get in the car, start it up. I'd put a tape in the cassette player, fasten my seat belt. I'd flip on the headlights. I'd adjust the mirror, but not the seat — it was always impossible to put the seat back into the alignment which exactly fit my mother's frame, so I'd have to press the accelerator with my toes and peer over the steering wheel to see. Just as well, I thought; there'd be less of a chance of anybody noticing me.

I'd pull out cautiously onto Greenwood; backing out was hard for me, and the Buick was huge. A right onto Maple, and another cautious left, and I'd be on Route 17 and heading north with a stolen car and no license.

A small black nurse has asked me to leave; you need a sponge bath. St. Andrew's is a prepared hospital for those who are waiting, there is a snack bar, a cafeteria, a waiting room and smoking lounge on every floor, a large lobby on the main floor. The third floor waiting room is not the only place to go. Yet here I am, remembering. This is what I'm remembering:

There were four people in the waiting room other than me. A small, dark haired, olive-skinned woman with narrow eyes and an angry face. She sat on the front of her seat and swiveled constantly — she would put her face close to one person, then another, while speaking rapidly, energetically. Presumably the other three were members of her family — same olive skin, same dark hair. The young, thin man sitting next to her barely spoke, barely moved. The other woman was a much older version of the woman with an angry face. The other man was large. He wore a T-shirt, had a moustache, moved his arms and entire upper body when he spoke; occasionally he would leave his chair and pace across the room. Everyone moved. Except the thin man and me.

"Oh sweet Jesus," began the older woman, and she began to sway. "Oh Lord in Heaven and your sweet son Jesus Christ, come down now, be with Johnny..."

"Oh sweet Jesus," echoed the woman with the angry face, making small circles with her torso while seated in the chair."

"Dear Lord, Johnny who used to be so near to you seems now to have lost his way..."

"He's lost his way, Lord," was the echo.

"Somehow I feel, though, O merciful Savior — I feel like he's just holdin' out his hand waiting for your love to shine in him again —"

"Oh hallelujah, Lord!" He was up out of his seat again. "Right now, oh God, I feel that you're right here with us. Oh thank you, God, for coming down and just spreading your mercy right here among us..."

"Oh thank you, God," came the echo.

"Lord, your love here tonight is so strong I can taste it in the air, and I know that Johnny can feel it; please, Lord, open up his heart to your wondrous ways. . ."

"Open his heart, Lord."

My hands were clasped in my lap and I squeezed them together and tried not to listen. The thin man stared straight ahead, just as horrified. He caught my glance and, embarrassed, I looked immediately toward the tile floor.

I wished I was in her grandmother's room with the rest of my family, watching her die. The pace of the praying sped up.

"Oh, sweet Jesus, whose precious blood was spilled for us —"

"Be with us now —"

"Oh, sweet Jesus. . ."

The man increased his pace, the women swayed more quickly, and once again the large man caught my eye. This time I held his glance for a little longer before looking away. Then I decided I was never coming back.

Geoff, I never was as scared as I was the first night I stole my mother's car. Then suddenly I was on the highway and things depended on me. Cars began to zoom by me; I had to keep up the speed, I pressed the accelerator, the car responded. I turned the wheel and felt the wheels respond to my actions.

I could feel the road under me subsiding to the wheels — I felt my house slipping away. I listened to the radio. I noticed a certain animate rhythm in driving, rhythm that was not controlling, but controlled — by my feet, by my arms, by my fingers — even, it seemed, by my eyes. The accelerator was subservient to my foot — I kept my foot steady. I looked in the side view mirror and saw the road rushing by quickly, I looked in the rear view mirror and watched things falling behind, I looked ahead and watched the objects ahead of me moving closer. With the other cars, I kept a pace.

I saw the bright headlights of an oncoming car which was coming around a curve. Suddenly its beams flashed to low and I marvelled in such simple, effective communication. And when I decided it was time, fifteen minutes later, I turned around and came back. Parked the car in the driveway and resumed my sessile position on the sofa, where my heart beat with the excitement of what I had done.

Then my parents came home and told me Grandma's condition had not changed. "I wish she were dead," said my father.

"There's nothing we can do at this point," said my mother, "except wait."

So I stole the car the next week and once again it responded to my actions. Then I began to take it out twice a week. Each time I drove for fifteen minutes north on seventeen before turning around and

driving home for fifteen minutes. A half hour, that was all. I was never caught.

I became a very confident driver. My movements became organic — and the car responded faithfully to each tiny movement — foot on accelerator or brake, each tug of my hand on the wheel. My experienced eyes were cautious; they checked the mirrors periodically, but smoothly, relaxed. The road rushed beneath me. Each time I turned a corner I observed the re-positioning of the moon.

I'd turn around always after fifteen minutes of driving, I'd head reluctantly home. I was especially worried that one of the neighbors would see me on my way home. But our home was in the woods — our neighbors were far apart; the lighting was sparse. I would park the car in the exact same position, force myself to walk slowly back into my house, sit down and listen to my heart beating. And invariably my parents would return with the news that my grandmother's condition had not changed. "I wish she were dead," my father would say again and again.

"There's nothing we can do anymore."

It was my mother's voice that haunted me the most.

Saturday.

Last night when I went home I used the flashlight you gave me to figure out the type of bulb the light for the stairway takes. Then I drove to the grocery store and bought one, took it home and installed it. My asshole of a landlord would never have gotten around to it. He doesn't know what it's like, I suppose, to climb those steps in the dark.

When I got upstairs I began to clean. Floor to ceiling — I missed nothing. When I began to wash the big window with strong, circular motions, I saw my violinist neighbor performing her ritual dance. I watched her for a while before she suddenly stared with the perception, I suppose, that one has at times when aware of being watched. She stopped her music, turned, and made eye contact with me. For a moment we stared at each other. Then we continued our movements.

I'm writing this, by the way, in my car, on the side of the road. Tonight your mother called and said you had begun to respond — nothing big, she stressed, but the doctors say you will only get better from here; the outlook is positive. She said she thought I might like to come up right away. I said I thought maybe I wouldn't tonight. She asked if I believed the doctors; I said I believed only that you would get better. Perhaps that was not even a lie. Then I said I had to leave right away.

And I got in my car and drove — just to feel the machine responding to my every motion, just to feel the road under me, just to see how long I could keep the moon in front.

Platelets

It's amazing that blood is so red.

Johnny at the pool
Johnny at the pool
Little Johnny stumbled, tripped,
Fell down and broke his head.

(It's amazing that blood is so red.)

Screams split
Arms help
Patting, rocking, quieting, quieting
Patting, rocking, shh.

It's amazing
(Now you're better; you laugh
And I miss the blood-smooth face, now
sticky)

That blood is
(Gone and I look for it,
want it back?

Screaming withdrawn,
Wetness gone, and
I wish you were once more)

so red.

Katie Melissa Degentesh

Bones

Jody is thinking about bones. Slick, slimy bones, in her back maybe, that make knuckle-like popping noises when she arches and stretches. Or perhaps the bones are dry, and fit against each other dryly, like the cardboard edges of a puzzle: click, thunk.

That day at school, Miss Perry had said something odd about bones; she had said, in her surprised voice: "Emily, dear! You have such beautiful bones!" Jody could not help overhearing, because she was standing next to Emily. Jody had stared at Emily for a while and wondered about her beautiful bones.

How does anyone, even Miss Perry (or even Emily for that matter) know what Emily's bones are like, thinks Jody. Covered up, they look pretty enough, but who is to say that Emily's bones, exposed, aren't stained a funny blue color, or filled with worms? Maybe they are covered with pimples, little raw red mountains. Jody giggles to think of Emily stretching out her skin every morning, layering it carefully to cover her pimpled bones in the way that her older sister might put on makeup.

The giggle is just loud enough to catch the attention of a big-toothed black boy who had been almost-sleeping in the seat ahead of Jody. He sits up on his knees, towering over the creased vinyl seat to glare at Jody, and then settles back to stare out the window.

Jody faces the window, too, resting her skull on the red metal handle beneath it, and enjoying the buzzing rattle her teeth make with the vibration of the engine. She does not want the bus to stop; she doesn't want to get off at the bus stop.

Jody feels herself sliding forward—the side of her face sticks to the black vinyl seat, and the bus hisses to a halt. She stands up and struggles with the straps of her backpack, knowing that soon she is going to have to push her way off the bus again.

"Hey! Can I come over you guyses house today?" yells a girl's voice. It is Tina. Jody doesn't like Tina, any more. She hasn't liked Tina for a long time; she is glad that Tina is talking to—who? oh, Ricky—and not her.

After her backpack bounces against a seat and she squeezes past the other children, Jody's shoes hit the pavement, and she is first from the bus, as always. She walks very fast; usually she can get to the corner and past Tina's yellow house before the bus does. Jody always walks home alone and gets there first, even though her house is farthest away from the bus stop. She doesn't talk to anyone on the way because there is no one to talk to that walks as fast as she does.

Jody walks fast because she is fast, and because she knows that no-one else would walk with her, anyway: they are afraid of her father, who throws stones at the kids and darts at the stray dogs who enter the yard.



"Those are the kind of kids you really don't want to play with anyway, Jody," Mom had said to Jody one morning when she missed the bus and Mom had had to drive Jody to school. "I never did like that Tina girl very much, but I didn't say anything about it because I thought you should have some friends in the neighborhood." Mom was probably only saying this because she was angry at Jody's dad, who was so rude to the neighbors. Jody didn't care; she didn't really have much to say about Tina.

"She was OK. I liked her OK." Jody was thinking about the first time that Tina had come to visit

her. Almost two years ago, a funny-boned blonde girl had simply appeared on the other side of Jody's fence and begun to eat the wild grapes that grew on it, yelling "Hi!" between mouthfuls. Knowing that Tina belonged to the large family down the street and that she was about three years older than herself, Jody had figured that Tina was just yelling to make noise, and ignored her.

"Whatsamatter with you? Aren't you even allowed to come out and say hi to me? I came to play with you!" Tina persisted. Actually, Jody wasn't allowed out of the yard when her parents weren't home. It was a big enough yard, so she didn't mind.

"I see ya got a swingset. Can I come'n play on your monkey bars?" asked Tina.

Not knowing what to make of this sudden shower of attention from a girl who seemed to be so much older and independent than herself, Jody said: "Sure... We can play circus, or gymnastics..."

Tina clambered over the chain-link fence, wrinkling her nose as she did so. "Naw... Let's just play on the swings."

"Ok..." said Jody, wondering what they would do on the swings, if they weren't playing a game. Jody liked to pretend that she was doing something else, when she was doing something. Just swinging was boring.

Tina climbed up on the monkey bars and hung upside down while Jody stared at her. "Bet you can't do this!" she taunted.

Jody knew that she could probably hang from her knees, if she wanted to. But she didn't, and she said so. "That's boring. Let's play something else."

"Tammy can hang upside down, and she's younger than you are." Tammy was Tina's sister, who was in first grade with Jody. Tammy was in a different class than Jody, who was in the highest reading group.

"Maybe so," said Jody, "but I'm smarter than she is. She's only in Mr. Barclay's reading group, and I'm in the highest."

Tina swung up and perched herself indignantly on the bars. "You're ignorant!" she said.

Jody didn't know why Tina had said that, but she knew that she wasn't ignorant. "'Ignorant' means someone who isn't smart and doesn't know anything, and I'm in the highest reading group at school, so I can't be ignorant, so there!"

"Yes you are. You're ignorant." Tina was firm. Jody decided that since Tina was so much older than she, she could be right.



That was how it was when Tina came over. Tina was different from Jody's school friends, who knew how to play Spy and House and Wizards and Circus. When Jody climbed a tree, it was a lookout, or a mast; when Tina climbed a tree, it was a tree.

Once, in the summer, Jody got Tina to play House with her. Tina was the mom, and she cooked soup. Jody wasn't allowed to look at the soup until Tina had finished making it. When she did look, the bowl was full of little limp caterpillars. Jody was fascinated by their bonelessness. She picked one up, and shuddered as it she felt its moist, cold fuzz on her fingers.

"It's DEAD!" Jody yelled, and flung it away. "They're all dead." There were handfuls of tiny caterpillars in the bucket that Tina had used for cooking.

Tina laughed. "Of course they are, you idiot. I got 'em straight out of their tent and drownt 'em."



That was almost the last time that Tina came to visit. That day had been especially hot, and Jody's mom made them lemonade, with ice cubes. They sat on the concrete porch and drank it. When they were finished, Tina chewed on the ice cubes. Today Tina was in a particularly silly mood, and pretended to be her gramma, who had no teeth and had to wear dentures that made her talk funny.

"Awwwww!!! Booo-boooooo!!!!" Tina yelled in a creaky, old voice, pointing at some trash on the porch floor, and holding the ice in her mouth so that she would look toothless. Jody giggled.

Suddenly Tina started to cough; the piece of ice was stuck in her throat. Jody watched her cough. She wondered how long it would take before the ice in Tina's throat melted away so that Tina would stop coughing. She thought that maybe this was something she should ask her mother about.

"Moooooom!"

"Mother isn't home. What do you want?" Daddy was standing in the doorway. Then Daddy saw Tina, who had stopped coughing and started grabbing at her throat. Daddy looked angry. He moved over to Tina—he did not run, but he went very fast, faster than Jody thought daddies could move—and slapped Tina on the back, hard. She coughed, and the piece of ice came out into her mouth. She stood up. Her eyes were watering.

Daddy was angry. He started to yell. "What the hell are you kids playing at, anyway? You get out of my yard. You take your white-trash ass back where it came from and don't let me see it again!" He said all of this to Tina. He ignored Jody. Jody didn't exist until Tina had let the screen door slam shut behind her.

Then Daddy turned to Jody. "What do you think you're doing, running around and eating at the same time? Do you know what could have happened? I don't want these kind of fools around here again—Do you understand?"

Jody turned away and started to cry, even though she didn't want to. "I SAID, Do you understand?" Jody's dad didn't wait for an answer. He stomped inside the house. That was good, because Jody didn't want to have to tell him that she didn't understand.



The next morning was Sunday morning, and Daddy went to church. Tina came to the fence early: "Wanna play?"

Jody couldn't believe that Tina had dared to come back after what her dad had said. "No... my dad..."

"Your dad just doesn't think I'm good enough for you, that's all. He's not even here. You're the one who's not letting me in... Is that what you think? I'm not good enough for you?"

"No-ooo..." Jody saw that Tina didn't understand. What if she came back, and he hit her again? Jody wouldn't be so eager to get slapped on the back, if she were Tina.

"You little snob. No one likes you, you know, 'cause you're such a little stuck-up snob. You're lucky I'll even play with you."

Jody was worried that Tina didn't like her anymore. "Ok... but don't let my mom see you—she'll tell. We have to stay in the tree."

Tina nodded. "I'll sneak around back."

Jody agreed, and told Tina that she would meet her at the Big Tree. The Big Tree was the only tree that Jody didn't mind climbing with Tina. She couldn't get up in it by herself, because the first branch was too high for her to reach. When Jody sat in the Big Tree, no one could see her because the leaves were so thick.

That day Tina and Jody climbed higher than ever before. They were so high that they could have jumped down and onto the roof of Jody's neighbor's house, if they had wanted to. Tina had suggested this, but Jody didn't want to.

"I'm hungry. I wish I had me some pizza." Tina whined.

Jody was irritated. They were supposed to be rangers looking for Robin Hood. Tina had a habit of talking about candy or pizza when she was in the middle of playing old-times, where there wasn't any pizza. Jody wondered what Tina would have done if she had had to live before someone invented pizza. Maybe Tina could have invented the pizza, thought Jody.

Sometimes, when the ice-cream man came by, Tina would ask Jody for money to get candy with, and Jody would always give it to her; because she felt sorry for Tina, and because Tina usually was nicer to her when Jody gave her money. Jody thought that someone who spent that much time thinking about Now'n'Later's should be able to have them whenever she wanted to. Tina always offered some to Jody (after all, it was Jody's money) but Jody didn't even like Now'n'Later's.

Now Jody heard the ice-cream man. He was playing an electronic version of "The Entertainer" and ringing his bell. Tina said "Oooo! Go get your money for me, will you?"

Jody grinned. She had brought her money with her, so that she wouldn't have to get out of the tree for Tina. She was glad she had thought of this. She handed Tina the coins. "Here."

Lazily, Jody watched from above as Tina ran to the truck and bought the candy. But, after she went

to the truck, Tina didn't turn around and come back. She walked in the other direction, towards her house.

"I seen your dad's truck coming around the corner," Tina yelled in explanation. "Bye!" She waved.

Tina had forgotten that Jody couldn't get out of the tree by herself. But that was okay, because Jody had forgotten too. She didn't remember that she couldn't get down by herself until it was too late to call for Tina.

Suddenly the tree wasn't a forest any longer, and Jody wasn't Little John. The tree was just a tree, and Jody was just Jody, hungry, and beginning to be a little frightened.

"Mom?" she called, in a soft voice. "Mom?" Jody realized that she didn't really want Mom (or Dad) to hear, because then they would know that Tina had come over, and Jody would be In Trouble. So she started to climb down carefully. Something shook; Jody didn't know whether it was the tree or herself that was trembling.

She managed to make it to the last branch, and then she sat for a long time. Jody wondered if she should jump or slide down the tree. She thought about jumping, about hitting the ground hard and solid, with both feet—and imagined that she heard the sound of bones cracking in her ankle. It would have to be sliding, then. She would slide down the tree, and no one would know that Tina had been there.

It's like a fireman's pole, and I'm the fireman; thought Jody as she hugged the rough bark. All at once (Jody liked to do unpleasant things, like jumping into cold water, all at once) she let her weight swing free of the tree's last branch. The tree tore at her shirt and lifted it up, leaving her skin exposed to become raw as she slid. Suddenly the ground was under her feet again; she hit with a hard thump and stood up shakily, right away. She looked at her stomach. It was scratched and bruised, but none of her scratches showed if she tucked her shirt in, and nothing was broken.

At that moment Jody's mom rang the bell for lunch, so she ran to the door. They were both waiting for her there.

Daddy hadn't seen Jody all day, and he was waiting for his naughty little girl. Daddy tickled the bones of her bruised ribs playfully: "Having a wild and crazy time, Tickle-Bones?" He picked her up, laughed, and waited for an answer.

Jody tried to grin and flinch at the same time. "I had fun, but I'm back now."



Jody is almost home. She walks so fast that she is lifting the latch of the chain-link gate and walking down the dirt path to her door long before Tina has made it to Ricky's house next door. Jody is big enough now that even the Big Tree doesn't scare her. She drops her backpack by the porch and climbs up: ready watch them play, and not afraid of falling.

Samantha Maire Johnston

My Day

The diner is small, cramped. It would be fashionable if it were cleaner, but coffee cups leave rings in the grease on the counter and the tabletops are like police blotters of all their former occupants. It's in the section of town that's an endless line of laundromats and liquor stores. That never seems right somehow. You'd think that after a while you'd just drink so much you wouldn't worry about your laundry. Or vice versa. No, that doesn't work. Never mind.

There's a teenage couple in the corner booth. In my day we'd have called them "freaks". I can hear their urgent, clipped conversation above the low hiss of the grill.

"No, that's not what I meant," the guy says.

"Well then what the hell did you mean?" the girl says. She reminds me a little of me in younger days. Same long dark hair, same thick eyeliner, same affected cynicism.

"It's just that I've been working at McKenzie's Produce for like four years now and I think it's about time she stopped bringing home damaged food."

"Alex, it was just a bag of apples."

"Christ! That's what *she* said! 'It's just a bag of apples,' she said. 'Well, why'd you get bruised ones?' I said. 'How could I tell?' she said. 'The bag is *clear*!' I said. And then, and then... are you listening to me?" The girl looks up. She had lit a pack of matches on fire and was watching it burn. She looks annoyed.

"Yeah."

"So she goes, 'They were in the middle!' Like all the bruised ones fuckin' *migrate* to the middle of the bag or something!" He lights a cigarette. His hands are shaking.

"Alex, why can't you give you mom a break." She picks at her cuticle. Black nail polish. An old favorite.

"What the hell?!"

"She raised three kids all by herself. Cut the woman some rein."

"I don't get you. Every goddamned time I bring her up you pull this 'raised three kids' shit. Like that's some kind of moral sanction for bringing home bruised fruit!"

"Well..." she draws this word out. "Maybe when you live a life like that you just look for the ripe things and stop looking for the bruises." From my position at the counter I can see he's about to pop.

"What the fuck?!" he yells. "Is that supposed to be *deep*?!"

That's what Michael used to say when I'd get too unfathomable. Ah, Michael. Dear sweet Michael of the piercing blue eyes and hair-trigger temper. Michael who wasn't at the station tonight when my train pulled in. I got his machine the last time I called. There's a pay phone just outside the diner. Every time I go out there the kid behind the counter gives me a doleful stare. I must look painfully disenfranchised.

"Are you saying I'm incapable of depth?" was my usual sly reply.

"No," he'd say, guarding his words. "It's just that you get in over your head sometimes, that's all."

"And how else," I'd answer, "would you define depth?" The three veins on his forehead would throb with exasperation, looking almost like a peace sign. Then we'd fuck.

I wonder if they'll fuck after all this is done. I can still hear them, bickering in that charming, harmless way. It's a love thing, I think. A trust maneuver. Grand thing to be able to spar like that, in every confidence that when the dust clears you'll be just as solid as before. Maybe it's only when

you're older that the fighting get crucial. You start to chip away. A chip off the old block. Jesus I'm depressing myself.

"I'm bored," she said. Younth mantra. "What's Greg doing tonight?"

"I dunno. Maybe his brother can get us some beer."

I remember that. Long nights driving from one friend's house to another. Short perfunctory calls to see if their older siblings were home to score us some liquor. It was full, relentless, repetitive, but forbidden so we did it. Wait till it's not a luxury, kid. Wait till it needs you.

"So call him." She's trying to blow smoke rings. It looks like she's french-kissing the air.

"Got a quarter?"

"No."

"Shit." He's looking at me, probably for the first time. When I was that age adults were just a part of the scenery. Like those giant black ants that can crawl over a colony of little brown ones and never even notice. My high school Psych teacher called it "parallel play". He walked over to me. Now it's perpendicular.

"You got change for a dollar?" he mumbles, looking down.

Christ. I want him to look me in the eye. I want to tell him that I was him just ten years ago. Something lame like, "I'm not really old! I just look like the Establishment!" But I don't. Teen years are like dog years. By his standards I'm a Natural History exhibit.

It's like those conversations Mike and I used to have with the old-timers at local shows. They'd talk about seeing the 'Pistols in '77 and stuff. We'd both be really impressed. And disgusted.

"That guy's at *least* 27!" Mike would say. "Isn't it about time he got a life?" I'd watch the guy walk to the edge of the stage and nod his head in time with the music.

"I don't see why," I'd respond. "You're almost eighteen and you don't have a fucking clue."

I hand the kid a quarter. He looks up. Piercing blue eyes. Damn.

"I have change," he insists.

"Don't worry about it, dude," I say in archaic slang. "Cool t-shirt."

"Uh, thanks," he mutters, embarrassed, and makes his way out to the phone. Yeah, I'm pathetic. So the fuck what.

The coffee's getting cold. I look up at the faded Coca-Cola clock above the grill. It reads 10:45. I check my watch: 9:15. "Shit," I hiss. I wind my watch. I rub my eyes. I sip my coffee. The boy comes in from outside.

"It's on," he calls to the girl. "Evacuate." She gets up from the booth, reaches into the pocket of her corduroy jacket, and sprays some change on the table.

"Can I bum a smoke?" I ask as she passes.

"Huh?"

"A smoke," I say. "Can I bum one?" The expression on her face is totally blank.

"What are you talking about?" she squints. Shit. What the hell do they call them now?

"Blaze, Nicole!" the boy calls impatiently from the door. The girl turns to me.

"Do you want a *cigarette*?"

"Uh, yeah." She's still squinting. Great. So now I'm the relic who doesn't know the word for cigarette. Christ I feel old.

"Here." She fumbles in her pocket, draws out a cigarette, and hands it to me. Slowly. Like I'm going to bite her.

"Come *on*!" The boy flies out the door. The girl follows, slowly, glancing back at me with the same incredulous expression.

"Do you have a light?" I ask the kid behind the counter.

"Huh?" he says.

"Never mind." I look through my purse and find a book of matches from the snack bar on the train. I inhale in smooth, expert drags.

Haven't done that in a while, I muse. Not since Mike and I split up. That was a pack-and-a-half-a-day week. In between packing up my shit and leaving town my nerves were rubbed rare. I must've drained a gallon of scotch that week. Good stuff, too. But that's all behind us now, we agreed. Still good friends and all. And this, just one good friend coming to town to spend the weekend with an-

other good friend, and maybe get some of her CD's back. Friends. Good ones. God I want a drink.

"You have reached the residence of Michael Edward Owens. I'm not in to take your calls right now, but if you'll be kind enough to leav-' Hello? Hello? I'm here, who is it? Shit — wait a second. How do I turn this damn thing off?" I hear his voice over the recording and feel a liquid rush in my gut. "Yes, hello?"

"Mike, it's Claire — where the hell have you been?"

"Claire? Shit! The train! Oh man — I'm sorry. Oh wow! It's just that Delia's been kind of freaking out on me lately and she called me up crying tonight and I had to go over to her place and calm her down and stuff." Delia's his latest. I grit my teeth.

"Mike, I've been at this shithole diner for two and a half hours."

"Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry Claire. It must've just totally slipped my mind."

"Look, fine, just come and pick me up. I'm at the Eastside Eatery on the corner of — "

"Uh, Claire?"

"Yes, Michael."

"Well see, Delia's really upset so she's spending the night here, uh, tonight." I don't believe this. I really don't believe this. "Claire? Hello?"

"Mike, it's about seven degrees at this pay phone. I don't care if I have to sleep in your bathtub. Get your ass over here."

"Well, Claire, that's the thing, see. Delia's kind of upset about you spending the weekend at the apartment. I mean, she knows about when, well you and I being a thing and so, uh — "

"Yes, Michael?" I want a drink. A drink and a cigarette.

"Do you think you could find a motel or something? Just for tonight, I swear. I'll pay for it — the cab, too. It's just that, well, you know." And a gun. A drink, a cigarette, and a gun. "Claire?" God I feel tired all of a sudden. Bone-weary.

"Yeah. Okay." Fuck.

"Claire, you know I — "

"I'll call you tomorrow, Michael."

"Claire, I didn't — "

"Goodnight, Michael." I hang up the receiver gently; no energy to slam it down. Within minutes I'm on the curb, suitcase in hand, wondering what cabby would be crazy enough to come down here at this time of night.

Laundromat, liquor store, laundromat. As I walked down the street the scenery perfectly echoes my mood. Wanna get clean, then dirty, then clean again. Detergent, intoxicant, detergent. I feel like the spin cycle.

I slip into a cab parked in front of the "Thriftee-Thirstee Liquor Mart."

"Where to, ma'am?"

"Know any cheap places to spend the night?"

"By the hour or half-hour?" His eyes smile in the rearview mirror.

"Fuck you," I laugh softly. He chuckles.

"There's a HoJo on 8th — that okay?"

"Killer." He puts the cab in gear and flips the radio on. It's the oldies station.

"Nah," he drawls, "they don't write 'em like that anymore."

"Ever seen these guys live?"

"Yeah, I seen 'em a couple times. Great pit." He pulls a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. "You mind?"

"Nah." He rolls down the window. The air doesn't seem as cold now, just extra-vivid. Like an exclamation point. "Hey," I say, "can I bum a smoke?"

"Yeah sure." He hands the pack to me. "Need a light?"

Erin Kathleen Rowe

Mortality and Music

In the apartment upstairs, Caroline played. The fingers of her left hand were poised tautly over the neck of the violin and the strings. Her right hand grasped the bow and moved vigorously upon the strings to form the beautiful music. Her dark red hair, pulled back tightly into a bun at the nape of her neck, escaped in strands clinging to her neck and forehead as she increased the tempo and passion of her music. Composers and their age-old masterpieces flowed easily through her fingertips as they changed from notes on a page into music and from music entered the realm of magic.

Caroline's mother hesitated with her hand on the doorknob. She opened her mouth and closed it, then took a deep breath. "Caroline!"

The music stopped abruptly. "Yes, Mom?" Caroline called, hurrying into the miniature family room, still holding the small, brown instrument in her hands.

Abigail Spellman was a small woman, barely five feet in height. Her dirty-blond hair was pulled tightly into a bun that was slightly off-center. The pale yellow of her severe uniform swallowed her skin and dimmed her eyes. There were dark purplish smudges like bruises underneath her eyes and her frail shoulders slumped forward slightly.

"I have to go to work now, sweetie."

"Okay, Mom. I'll lock up behind you." Caroline leaned down and kissed her mother's cheek, then she gently set aside the violin and straightened the collar on her mother's jacket. Abigail had been beautiful once. "Take care of yourself. Don't let those jerks harass you too much."

"The night shift isn't really that bad," Abigail said with a small sigh. "The diner's better than that bar was. Usually just some drunk college kids or people getting off their night shifts come in. I'd rather work now than at lunch, except the tips are lousy."

Caroline smiled. "Soon you won't ever have to work again."

Abigail smiled tiredly. "When you make your fortune, right?"

"Exactly."

"Well, until then, I have to do something."

Caroline looked down at her hands. "I can get a job, Mom."

"The last time you tried to get a job and practice at the same time, you collapsed."

"But, Mom—"

"No."

"It won't always be like this. I promise."

Abigail just smiled again and walked out.

Caroline sighed deeply. As the door closed gently, Caroline locked, bolted, and chained it. She turned back to the apartment, clutching the violin in her hands. It was a tiny, cramped apartment lacking in furniture and coziness. Her hatred of the apartment and the city burned in the back of her throat like an unquenchable match. Car horns and blaring stereos and sirens were the only music around her, except for her violin. There was no beauty visible at all from the square window in her bedroom, no beauty that existed amidst city teeming with people and garbage. No beauty, except her mother's. But even that was slowly fading with every year that passed, every night she waited tables.

She put the violin underneath her chin, her fingers suddenly tensing as they took their positions. She took a deep breath and began again. She played until exhaustion overwhelmed her and the clock

read two o'clock. She placed the violin carefully in its purple velvet lined case and fell into bed, her back, neck, arms, and fingers cramping with the cold fire of intense aching.



Her eyes burned as they gazed, slightly unfocused, at the blaring alarm clock. She groaned as her hand slammed down on the "off" button.

"What time is it?" Abigail's thin voice barely carried from the other bedroom.

"Almost six. When did you get in?"

"About five minutes ago."

"I'll be home around five tonight."

"Five? Why so late?"

"Remember Monsieur Gavroche moved my lesson to Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"Oh. Don't forget you promised to pay the bills tonight." Abigail's voice became deeper with the last sentence, a faint irritation threading around the exhaustion. "Don't let Mr. Gavroche bully you too much."

"I won't. He likes to fuss—it makes him feel like an artist," Caroline said, laughing slightly as she pulled on a pair of faded jeans.

"Well, if he's so much —" Abigail bit off the last of her sentence. "Never mind." Her voice dropped again.

"I'll see you later, Mom. Take care of yourself while I'm gone."

"I will."

"I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too, sweetie," Abigail mumbled, sleep overtaking her.

Caroline hastily swallowed some cereal, then picked up her book bag and violin case and rushed out the door, hoping she'd get to see her mother before work. Sometimes they went days without even seeing each other.

She arrived at school at quarter to seven. Class were going to begin soon, she thought, glancing briefly at the clock above the main office. She rushed to her locker and unloaded most of the books, grabbing a notebook and shoving her violin case inside. She made it to English just before the tardy bell rang.

She slumped into a chair, cradling her head in her arms on top of her desk.

"Late night, Caro?"

Caroline reluctantly looked up, her eyes meeting the gaze of Sara Gibson.

"Yeah."

"Homework?"

"Practice."

"Ugh. I was up late too— college applications. I finished an essay for a couple State schools and some little schools in Pennsylvania. What are you going to do?"

"Monsieur Gavroche told me to apply to Thurston."

"Thurston School for the Arts?"

"Yeah."

"Wow. "

"You're really into that violin thing, aren't you?"

Caroline kept herself from laughing aloud by sheer force of will and she nodded to Sara.

"Hey, do you want to come over to my house on Friday night? My parents are gone and I'm having a little party."

"I'm sorry, but I can't. I have to practice."

"Luke Hudson is going to be there. He's liked you forever."

Caroline blushed and looked down at her desk, her eyes carefully following the movement of her pen as it sketchily drew notes on a scrap of paper. She shook her head again. "Sorry, Sara."

"Well, it's OK if you change your mind." Sara began to move away then turned back around.

"Don't you ever have any fun?" But she didn't wait for Caroline to answer before she moved away.

Caroline stared after her, wanting to laugh again. Fun? Fun was hanging out with a bunch of immature kids she'd never liked in the first place watching them drink themselves into a stupor, while simultaneously trying to avoid Luke Hudson's wandering hands? She shook her head and hummed under her breath.

She didn't know the piece that she hummed; she rarely did. But she always hummed, often unconsciously. Instead of thoughts, notes swirled around in her head, dancing and playing until they formed a line of music and she hastily scribbled it down.

As her English teacher began to speak on the idea of Dr. Frankenstein as a Modern Prometheus, Caroline's mind wandered from the music in her head to Sara. *Fun*, she mused. Had she ever thought of playing the violin as fun? No, she realized. It was simply necessary.

Monsieur Gavroche's studio was part of a huge building downtown that contained many similar studios for other instruments, dancing, and acting. She walked up four flights of stairs until she reached the familiar studio of her violin tutor.

Monsieur Gavroche was waiting for Caroline and listening to a tape of Mozart piano concertos. He was a short, plump man with wispy grayish hair and a black mustache. He looked up when the door opened, pursing his thin lips.

"You're late, Caroline," he said quietly, his voice slurred by a slight French accent.

"I know, Monsieur Gavroche. I'm sorry, but I had to talk to my Calculus teacher after class."

"You're not falling behind in your studies, are you?"

"No."

"Good, because you'll need exemplary grades at Thurston as well as talent. Now, let me hear the Tchaikovsky." He clapped his hands together twice.

Caroline smiled slightly as she took the violin from its case and lifted it to her chin.

Monsieur Gavroche sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. He always listened with his eyes closed; "You don't hear with your sight," he was fond of saying.

He would never forget the day he discovered his little protégé: he was picking up some sheet music in a music store and had heard some violin playing from near the front. It had the rough sound of unpracticed genius and he'd hurried over to the noise. It was a little girl with flaming red hair, barely big enough to hold the instrument, plucking idly at the strings, her eyes closed.

"How long have you been playing the violin?" he'd asked her, kneeling down to her level.

She opened her dark brown eyes wide and looked at him. "I've never played before."

"Why did you pick it up?"

"It looked like fun. And I thought it would help."

"Help what?"

"Help the music in my head."

It had been extremely difficult for him to restrain his excitement and not frighten the little girl.

"How old are you?" he'd asked, breathlessly.

"Six."

"Where's your Mommy or Daddy?"

"Mommy's over there." She'd pointed to a small, blonde woman leafing through choir music.

And Monsieur Gavroche had hurried over to Abigail and begged her to let her daughter take lessons. She was truly gifted, he'd persuaded. Abigail, looking confused, had slowly said they couldn't afford lessons or a violin. Monsieur Gavroche had offered his services, and his violin, for free.

Caroline had been with him now for almost twelve years and he never tired of listening to her play.

He frowned at her when she finished the piece. "It was a little less lively than last week, Caroline. Has something been on your mind?"

Caroline sat down across from him. "I'm worried about Thurston," she admitted.

"Why?" he asked simply.

She grinned at him and jumped to her feet. She then launched into a powerful Beethoven. While she played, she thought of nothing but the music that lived inside her. When she was done, she looked at the plain, shiny instrument.

"I heard they have a Stradivarius at Thurston," she said.

"They do indeed."

A small sigh escaped her lips. She thought about the exquisite perfection of a Stradivarius and how the sounds from her own violin would never be as sweet.

"This is no time to be sighing over priceless instruments. This is practice time. My time. Now, play."

Caroline was thoroughly exhausted by the time she finished climbing the six flights of stairs to her apartment. *A bath*, she thought with longing as she flexed her aching back. *A steaming hot bath*. She took out her keys and unlocked the front door.

"I'm home, Mom," she called, throwing her book bag into a corner chair.

There was silence for a few minutes and the only thing Caroline could hear the faint sounds of the Goldburg's high-pitched quarreling through the heat duct and thin floor.

"Mom?" she called again, walking deeper into the living room.

"I'm here, sweetie." Abigail appeared at her bedroom door. "You didn't forget about the bills, did you?"

"No. Where's your checkbook?"

"My bag."

Abigail watched Caroline as her daughter took the checkbook and moved to the kitchen table.

"There's someone I want you to meet."

Caroline looked up at her mother in surprise. "Who?" she asked, a little more sharply than she'd intended.

"This guy I met at work last week. His name is Roger Maloy." Faint pink color run down Abigail's cheeks and throat. "I think you'll like him."

"When do you want me to meet him?" Caroline asked tiredly.

Abigail giggled. "Now. Come out here, Roger. Caro's home."

Caroline's fingers tightened their grip on the pen she used for paying the bills.

Roger appeared in the doorway behind Abigail, all but eclipsing her with his massive frame. He was well over six feet tall, huge with enormous arms and legs. His round cheeks were covered in dark brown razor stubble and his pale eyes were bloodshot. He lumbered forward, holding out his hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Caroline."

As he came closer, she tried not to wrinkle her nose in disgust, for he stunk like a man with an allergy to soap. She hesitantly took his hand—hers was engulfed and nearly crushed in his palm.

"Uh, yes, me, too," she said, a little confusedly, wishing she could see the expression on her mother's face.

"I know you two are going to be great friends," Abigail enthused, smiling brightly.

"I'm sure we will, Abby," Roger said, smiling down at Caroline.

When he spoke she caught another odor on him — the unique stench of cheap whiskey. She stepped back from him and sat down at the table. "I have a lot of work to do," she said.

"We won't disturb you," Abigail said, gesturing Roger back into the bedroom.

When her mother's bedroom door closed, Caroline covered her face with trembling hands. She was shaking with disgust and loathing and fear. He reminded her of someone she hadn't thought about in a long time: her father.

She had very few concrete memories of her father; he'd left her and her mother when she was four years old. But she did remember quite clearly the feelings he invoked in her. They returned sometimes in nightmares. It was the whiskey, she decided. Her father drank heavily and occasionally had hit her mother. Abigail told Caroline this many years later. Caroline couldn't remember anything, except fearing him. And six months after he left them, the police found his body floating face down in the Delaware river, a bullet hole through the back of his head.

She forced herself to take several deep breaths. When her hand was sufficiently steady, she began to quickly balance her mother's checkbook and pay the household bills.

feels about me."

"Yes," Caroline agreed, with a faint smile, knowing how much her mother resented Monsieur Gavroche's benevolent tyranny over Caroline's musical career.

"What will you do?"

"Get along the best I can, I suppose."

"You are welcome to practice here any time."

"Thank you." Caroline smiled at him, then slowly gathered her things and left.



There was a letter from Thurston waiting for Caroline on her kitchen table when she got home. Her mother and Roger were no where in sight and she sat down to read it.

"Before making any decisions regarding your admission to Thurston School for the Arts, we require at least one audition at the school and a short interview. This is mandatory. We have scheduled your appointment and it is listed below. If there is a serious conflict, please call the school as soon as possible to reschedule," the letter read.

Caroline stared down at it and realized that her hands were trembling. *An audition. Oh, my God,* she thought. She dropped the letter and pressed her hands to her mouth, tears prickling her eyelids.

The door opened and Abigail and Roger came in, laughing loudly.

"Why, Caroline, I didn't expect you home so early!" Abigail cried, hugging her daughter.

"Well, I had a bad lesson, so Monsieur Gavroche sent me home early."

"Oh, Mr. Gavroche! Pfff. Over-stuffed French prig."

"Mother!" Caroline cried. She leaned forward and smelled the scent of beer on her mother. "Have you been drinking?"

"Just a little," Abigail announced with another laugh.

"C'mon, Caro, your mom's a big girl now," roared Roger, slinging his arm around Abigail's waist and nuzzling her neck.

Caroline's jaw clenched and she balled her fists in her lap.

"Mom, I have an audition at Thurston next week. Is it all right if I have the car next Friday?"

"Of course, darling," Abigail said vaguely. "Hmmm, that feels good, Roger." She closed her eyes and relaxed against him.

Roger whispered something in her ear. She giggled and opened her eyes. "Caro— do you think Roger and I could— uh, be alone for a while?"

"Where do you expect me to go?"

"Don't you have any friends?" Abigail asked, snuggling more firmly under Roger's arm.

"Of course not. She's an artist, remember," sneered Roger.

Caroline's face flamed. "Mom, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Not now, dear. Can you just go in your room, please? And don't forget— I need you to look at that lease again from the landlord. I can't make heads or tails from it."

Caroline scooped her things into her arms and ran into her room, slamming and locking the door, tears of frustration rolling down her cheeks.



Caroline spent at least four hours every day in Monsieur Gavroche's studio practicing for her audition. She played violently and powerfully and gently and sorrowfully, she told stories and created beauty, she wove magic and broke spells. Monsieur Gavroche watched over her carefully and on Thursday, the day before her audition, he threw his arms around her and told her that she was ready.

She was practically numb with fatigue and achiness when she arrived home that night. She prayed that her mother and Roger would not be there. She hadn't seen much of them recently and ignored them when they were in the apartment. *Only a few more months, she told herself, then I can get the hell out of this house and go to Thurston and never see Roger again.*

Caroline's fear for her mother had congealed into disgust when Abigail began discussing plans for remarriage. Her last attempt at discussing her fears and Roger with her mother hadn't gone very well.

"For the last time, Caroline, Roger is nothing like your father! Roger is good and kind and will



"Caroline! What are you thinking about? It's certainly not music!" thundered Monsieur Gavroche, vigorously threading his fingers through his hair.

Caroline put down the violin, frowning down at her fingers, which refused to perform their task. "I don't know," she mumbled, slumping into a chair.

"This is the fourth lesson in a row in which you haven't improved one bit! What am I going to do with you? I would have expected this from a less dedicated student, but not from you. If you plan to get into Thurston, you must improve, not backslide, and you must do so quickly because they will want you to audition fairly soon."

Caroline slouched, her back suddenly aching. "I know you're right, Monsieur Gavroche. It's just, I—"

Monsieur Gavroche put his elbows on his knees and squinted at her from lashless eyes. "I have known you for a long time. I like to think that I'm not just a musical instructor."

"You're not."

"What's wrong?"

"I just can't concentrate anymore. "

"Is it school?"

She shook her head.

"It's not a boy, is it?" He frowned suddenly, his bushy brows meeting in a deep crease over his nose.

She blushed and shook her head quickly, chewing her lower lip.

"Then, what? I can't help you if you don't tell me."

"Well, my mom has this new — uh, boyfriend and I — well it's hard to explain. I kind of, uh — hate him."

"What exactly is the problem?" Monsieur Gavroche's voice had lowered considerably to a quiet hum, his French accent becoming more evident.

In the three weeks since Caroline had met Roger, she hadn't been able to tell anyone, least of all her mother, how much she loathed him. She looked at her teacher for a while, hesitated, then began speaking. The words tumbled from her mouth, sometimes jumbled, sometimes very clear.

"When I practice, he just sits there and watches me. I mean, he doesn't just watch, he *stares*. And he likes to brush up against me all the time. I feel so uncomfortable around him. Mom doesn't seem to notice anything at all. And he drinks constantly! It's disgusting. He's drunk half the time and he's very jealous of Mom. And they fight! Usually when I'm trying to do homework. He's there all the time. I feel so uncomfortable, I can't concentrate on anything. I go to school an hour early to do homework in the library. And I can't practice anywhere. If I lock myself in my room, I can hear their yelling over the music. I can't stand to be in my own house anymore.

"The Goldburgs let me practice in their apartment downstairs once, but I felt really guilty because they kept fighting at each other the whole time I was there. I don't know what to do. I tried to tell Mom that I didn't like Roger, but she wouldn't listen to me. She said I'm just not used to having 'a man' around. Roger hardly fits my definition of a *man*. "

Monsieur Gavroche was silent for a time, then he said: "I have a suggestion. Until your audition with Thurston, why don't you come and live with me? I have another artist in my house, a ballerina by the name of Bianca Deveureux. She's your age and you could practice and get your homework done. You need to get some rest. Your music should be the most important thing right now."

Caroline's face brightened for a moment, then her lids dropped over her eyes and she took a deep breath. "I'd love to, but I — I can't."

"Why ever not?"

She hesitated and then continued, in a very low voice: "He gets violent sometimes when he's angry with Mom and it scares me. He hasn't actually touched her, but he broke a window and some plates last week. I'm afraid to leave her alone with him."

Monsieur Gavroche's brow wrinkled deeply and he pinched his lips together. "That is a bad situation, Caroline, not just for you, but for your mother. I would speak to her, but you know how she

support us."

"We don't need him to 'support us'. We're doing just fine," Caroline had said, as calmly as she could.

"Maybe you don't, but what about me?" Abigail's eyes had filled with tears. "You're leaving me here all alone. You know I can't live alone. I don't how."

Caroline had been silent for a long time, then took a deep breath and said: "Wouldn't you rather stand alone then cling to some man who isn't good enough for you?"

Abigail's tears dried. "You know what, Caroline? You're just jealous. You're jealous because I've found someone to love. You're acting like a spoiled baby. You've had me to yourself your entire life and you just don't understand that I *need* Roger."

"Don't you see what's wrong with that? You shouldn't need anybody. And what about me? You never think about me anymore. Don't you care about Thurston?"

"You've been babbling about music school ever since you were twelve. It gets old after a while. Besides, I still think you ought to study a practical skill, so you have something to fall back on."

Caroline had sucked in her breath as if struck. Red flared onto her cheeks and throat. "Like waitressing?" she'd sneered, then had gone to her room and slammed the door.

Since then, Caroline had made no effort to discuss anything with Abigail.

The apartment was empty when Caroline opened the door. She exhaled deeply in relief. No arguments, no noise, only rest. Rest and sleep. She had to get a good night's sleep to leave at six-thirty, to drive the four hours to Thurston. She'd called and confirmed her eleven o'clock appointment last week and had gotten directions.

She lay down on her bed, staring at her ceiling, humming an unknown tune. She forced herself to concentrate on her breathing, instead of on thinking of the upcoming day. Slowly, her lids grew heavy and fell over her eyes and she was asleep.

Crash!

Caroline sat straight up in bed, heart pounding. She looked at her clock. It was four-thirteen A.M. She looked around her, trying to figure out the source of the noise. As her heart rate slowed, she heard a similar sound and her mother's voice— softly pleading.

Caroline slumped back in bed. *Another fight. Thanks, guys. Good timing.*

Roger began to shout. She could only hear bits and pieces of what he was saying in little, disjointed snatches. "I don't care what you say! — saw the way you looked at him! — Don't even try to tell me — I'm so sick — fucking slut —."

At the last, Caroline sat up again, anger spreading from her stomach to her toes. She flung her legs over the side of the bed and sat on the edge, straining to hear their words.

Abigail's voice got even quieter and more slurred. *She's crying*, Caroline realized. *That fucker*. She got up and tip-toed to the door. They were in the living room.

There were two sounds, close together, unlike any other sound Caroline had ever heard before. It was a faint cracking noise, followed by the sound of glass breaking. The noises sent chills running down her spine. She was suddenly frightened and she slowly opened the door.

There was one dim light on in the living room. Roger was standing with his back to the front door, fists clenched, chin quivering, chest heaving. Pieces of pottery and a table lay on the floor at his feet. Abigail was pressed with her back against the far wall, her hands over her face, weeping loudly and rocking back and forth slightly.

Caroline sucked in a scream and jumped back three steps, with her hands over her face, shaking violently. Her mother had removed her hands, to reveal her face. Her lower lip was distorted with swelling, blood dripping down her chin. One eye was black and purple, swollen shut. Caroline's breathing became shallow and quick and she looked wildly around her room in search of *something*.

She found it in the back of her closet. It was a small, but heavy and fairly dangerous field hockey stick her grandfather had brought her from Australia when she was ten. It was much too small to play with now, but hard, wooden head had damaging capabilities. She didn't even realize what she was going to do until her hand reached her doorknob and she had a sudden vision of herself slamming the

stick over Roger's head until his blood sprayed across the walls and his skull was crushed. The image shocked her because its violence brought her a shot of pure adrenaline. Bloodlust.

She flung open her door, her hair falling down her shoulders in wild disarray, her face pale, one hand clinging tightly to the stick in her right hand. Both Abigail and Roger stared at her in shock.

"Caro— go away," began Abigail in a soft, trembling voice.

"No," Caroline said firmly, her eyes locked to Roger's.

Roger laughed. "Don't scare me, little girl," he mocked, then turned to the door and left.

Caroline rushed over and locked, bolted, and chained it behind him. She collapsed against the doorknob, the hockey stick crashing to the floor from her limp hand. When she felt as though she could move, she turned around to face her mother.

They stared at each other in silence for a long time. "Oh, Mama," whispered Caroline, reaching out and taking her mother's arm.

Abigail winced. Her left wrist was badly swollen.

Caroline dropped her hand. "Sit down, Mom." She moved quickly into the kitchen and got several towels and two bags of ice. Her mother sat on the couch and Caroline carefully wiped the blood from her mother's mouth and chin, examining the wound.

"You might need stitches."

"I can't go to the doctor," Abigail mumbled.

"I don't know anything about black eyes," Caroline said and handed her mother a pack of ice.

"We don't have raw meat or anything."

Abigail smiled faintly, a grotesque mockery on her distorted face.

"Jesus Christ, Mother," Caroline whispered, after a long silence.

Abigail began to shake violently. "I don't— know—what—happened," she stuttered.

Caroline put her arms around her mother and held her. "It's okay, now. I promise."

"I'm so— scared."

"I know. I am, too."

"Don't leave me. Promise you won't leave me."

"Of course I won't."

Caroline held her mother tightly to her chest, her arms around her mother's waist, gently stroking her head. After a long, long time Abigail's trembling stopped and she fell into a deep sleep.

Caroline was wide awake for many hours afterwards, her tears sliding silently into her mouth and on her mother's hair, listening to the faint sounds of the Goldburg's incessant quarreling and hearing the clock chime first six, then seven, then eight times.

Ryan Monroe Walker

Cul-de-sac

"Is there a cul-de-sac at the end of this road?" asked Will in his soft, high voice.

"A cul-dy-sac?" Ed replied. His voice was rough and rich.

"To turn around in."

"Oh. Didn't know we were going the wrong way."

They motored on, with Will leaning over the wheel, his tall forehead five inches from the windshield, two small bright round eyes scanning for a place to turn around. His shiny black hair was combed from a center part straight off to the sides, his bangs making an arc above his forehead.

"Ya know you could just as well turn around in one of the drive ways," suggested Ed, "that's what I'd do." Ed's messy hair, heavy skin, and big eyes were all reddish-brown. A dozen gray hairs in his beard were responsible for the only contrast.

"Is that a cul-de-sac ahead?" Will wondered aloud.

"Oh, yeah, it is."

"No, that's not a cul-de-sac." It was hard to tell because it had snowed heavily the day before. The center of the court was white, with the asphalt exposed only in tire tracks around the outside.

"Yeah, I think it is," argued Ed.

"Oh, I see, I thought it was just a stop."

"A stop?"

They circled around and continued back up the way.

"Are your eyes OK?" Ed asked.

"They're fine, why?"

"You've been leaning over the wheel. For a while now."

"Yes, I know... It makes it easier to look for the road." Will leaned gradually to the back of his seat, slowing the car as he did so. When he became comfortable with his new posture, he came back up to speed. He started to whistle and hum self-consciously, "Do-dee-do-dee-do."

"Where's the road?" he asked after a time, leaning back over the wheel and squinting.

"Where's the road?", Will?" Ed asked.

"The one we're supposed to go to."

"Oh. What's it called?"

"Floyd's Way."

"We passed Floyd's Way," Ed pointed over the back seat. After a short silence, Will said "Well I'll just turn back around... Think there'll be a cul-de-sac any time soon?"

"I'd just pull into a driveway."

"Yes... I'll pull into a driveway." They passed a few driveways, then slowed abruptly, bucked onto a gravel drive, and rolled down the lumpy lane through some dense woods. Ed wondered why Will was going so far down the drive, but he didn't say anything.

At the end of the quarter-mile drive, they came to a small house with white paint cracked and blistered on wooden panels, the siding curling away from the house like shelves of fungus. A cement patio was canopied in lime green aluminum, with a reef of junk in its far corner corroded into a permanent form.

"Allright," Will sighed. He pulled slantwise into the square gravel lot, to the left of a snow-capped rust-red flat-tired car by a shed.

From the patio, a chalky old man glared suspiciously at the challengers of his property. With his tapering jaw and chin his head and neck looked like the top and bottom of a burnt out light bulb, and a large one, as his head at its widest almost out-spanned his shoulders. His body looked like pockets of loosely stuffed rags hanging just to the floor, supported by the hovering bulb.

Will didn't notice the man because he was concentrating on his maneuvers. He backed slant-wise across the lot without turning the wheel, reversing his first move, redundantly it would seem. Then he turned his head around, glanced at the man on the porch, and gave him a short wave and a cheery "Good day."

The windows were rolled up so the man didn't hear. Instead he shouted at his wife in the kitchen, who was running water in the sink and couldn't hear him, "Wha-do these busters think we've got a cul-de-sac here! This ain't no blamin' cul-de-sac busters!" Will could hear the tone of the shouts but not the words.

Will and Ed had nosed into the corner of the gravel lot, to the left of the entrance. Their helmsman checked the situation behind and with a little more haste they swept to the opposite corner, giving a good four feet to the bumper of the rusty car at the shed.

The angry castellan had in the meantime scooped a loitering hen up into his arms and made for the access of the lot. "Not gonna do your car in my park like it's a blamin' cul-de-sac," he shouted, holding the chicken to his chest as if his own bodily welfare was not a stake to the intruders but the life of his bird was inviolably sacred.

In a moment fated for violent confrontation, Will gripped the wheel resolvedly and pressed the gas, determining his exit regardless, until, with no more than a canoe's length to spare, the old man dove, bird in arm, onto a mattress he had been meaning to dump. His head landed first and the rest of his body followed like a tail.

"Well..." said Will, peering in his rear view mirror at the cloud of dust and feathers, "That certainly was a hospitable one. I venture to say it serves him right."

"Could be you're right, Will," said Ed, a bit incredulous at Will's assertive tactics.

They didn't speak again until they were back on the main road, heading toward the intersection of Floyd's Way.

"I guess I don't have to mention that driveway again," Will began.

"What?"

"This is not to say I told you so but it might not have been a good idea to use that driveway in the first place. There was probably a cul-de-sac just around the corner. It would have been less trouble. I don't enjoy that type of confrontation."

"Well, maybe you're right. But I was just thinking that you might not get your cul-de-sac so soon."

"That's why you wait, to see if there's a cul-de-sac. You wait and find out."

"Sure, well, fine."

"Yes, fine."

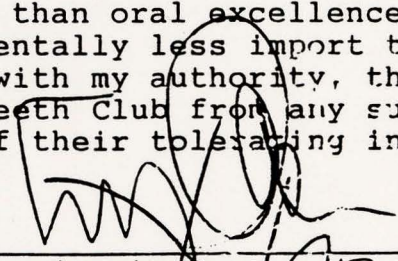
Mountain Climber

A celebrated man elected
To separate from his peers,
Climb to a snowy mountain peak,
And there perfect his talents.

A week above the earthen mound passed,
And he hungered for the city
To see his new excellence,
But it would not budge from the snowy peak,
And he returned a common man.

I, Dr. Michael H. Allen, Dental Authority, do hereby grant permission for Ryan David Walker to participate in the Clean Teeth Club, despite his imperfect dental history, with my signature below. I realize that I am condoning, with this signature, the intermingling of those of perfect dental fortitude with one, Ryan David Walker, of less than oral excellence, in the name of art, something of fundamentally less import than hygiene. In doing this, I absolve, with my authority, the remainder of the cavity-free Clean Teeth Club from any suspicion of compromised hygiene as a result of their tolerating inferior company.

He must promise to
remove his dentures and rinse
them after eating



signature
3/22/73

date





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